CONFERENCE OF THE COMMITTEE ON DISARMAMENT

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Working paper containing some comments and suggestions for making the Committee on Disarmament more effective

1. In its statement on 17 February, at the first meeting of the 1970 session of the Committee on Disarmament, the Mexican delegation clearly explained its view that the Committee should help to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations by doing its utmost to achieve substantial progress, preferably on all four of the following questions the Committee is working on: Disarmament Decade, prohibition of underground nuclear weapon tests, chemical and micro-biological weapons, and treaty on the reservation of the sea-bed and the ocean floor exclusively for peaceful purposes.

2. Previously, at the 1691st meeting of the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, held on 17 November 1969, the Mexican representative in that Committee had reviewed a number of constitutional questions (happily since resolved by General Assembly resolution 2602 B (XXIV)) and procedural matters connected with the Committee's work; outlining certain conclusions and indicating the intention of his delegation to revert to the subject in due course in this Committee.

3. This working paper is thus inspired by the two statements to which I have referred and is also related, so far as one of the points discussed in it is concerned, to the study recently published by the International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) entitled "The ENDC and the Press". The purpose of this paper is to present some specific comments and suggestions which, in the Mexican delegation's opinion, could increase the effectiveness of the Committee's work in the immediate future.

Disarmament Decade

4. It is well known how modest the achievements of the Committee on Disarmament have been so far. The few agreements on collateral measures which it has already reached and which, hopefully, it may achieve in the near future should not obscure the fact that the question of general and complete disarmament under effective international control is still, and must continue to be, the basic purpose, the ultimate objective, and the very raison d'être of the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament.

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5. That is what makes most timely and deserving of special support resolution 2602 E (XXIV), adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December, in which the Assembly declared the decade which is now beginning as a "Disarmament Decade", and requested the Committee "to work out ... a comprehensive programme, dealing with all aspects of the problem of the cessation of the arms race and general and complete disarmament under effective international control, which would provide the Conference with a guideline to chart the course of its further work and its negotiations, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its twenty-fifth session."

6. The Mexican delegation considers that this is a task which both because of its importance and because it has been relatively neglected in previous years should be accorded priority in the Committee's efforts. It also believes that, for the preparation of the comprehensive programme called for by the General Assembly, it would be highly desirable for the Committee to know, at least in broad outline, the present position of the two States, which act as Co-Chairmen on the subject-matter to be covered by the programme in question, so as to have a realistic and effective basis for the work entrusted to it in the above-mentioned resolution.

7. It will be recalled that, in 1962, the Committee received separate draft treaties from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America: the text submitted by the Soviet Union is contained in documents ENDC/2, ENDC/2/Add.1 and ENDC/2/Rev.1, and that submitted by the United States of America will be found in documents ENDC/30, ENDC/30/Add.1 and ENDC/30/Add.2.

8. Although these two texts are still officially before the Committee, it is very probable that, as almost a decade has elapsed since they were drafted and in view of what has since taken place in disarmament negotiations, they are no longer an accurate reflection of the present position of their authors as regards the question of general and complete disarmament under effective international control. For this reason, it is extremely advisable that the Governments of the United States and the Soviet Union should submit revised versions of their respective drafts to the Committee, amended as they may deem necessary to reflect faithfully their position as at present.

Treaty on the reservation of the sea-bed and the ocean floor exclusively for peaceful purposes

9. The extensive and valuable debate that took place on this subject at the General Assembly's last session would appear to make its recapitulation in this Committee unnecessary, especially as, in addition to the records of the First Committee, there are various working papers which were submitted in New York and which contain a number of concrete suggestions for improving the draft prepared by the Co-Chairmen and reproduced in annex A to the Committee's report to the Assembly on its work in 1969.

10. In view of the stage that this subject has reached, perhaps the most constructive and appropriate procedure might be to establish a sub-committee of the whole, as suggested by the Mexican delegation on 17 February, or a smaller working group, as indicated by the Swedish delegation on 18 February or, if neither procedure is generally acceptable, to hold some informal meetings at which the bilateral consultations between the Co-Chairmen would be supplemented by a frank and clear presentation of the views of the other delegations represented in the Committee, so as to facilitate the preparation of a revised draft, offering the greatest likelihood of success.

11. Whatever may be the procedure adopted to prepare the draft treaty in question, it would appear essential that:

(a) the text of the draft should be acceptable to all members of the Committee;

(b) its preparation should be completed sufficiently in advance of the opening of the General Assembly to permit it to be duly studied by the Governments of all the other States Members of the world organization not represented in this Committee, so as to make it more likely that it will become one of the documents whose signature is intended to add lustre to the anniversary session of the United Nations, and

(c) in its work on the draft, the Committee should bear very much in mind the need for ensuring that that work does not result in a concentration of its activities in 1970 prejudicial to the adoption of other disarmament measures of greater importance which constitute urgent matters in the Committee's programme.

Calendar of meetings of the Committee

12. For a body such as the Committee on Disarmament, it is no doubt very useful and appropriate to have sufficient latitude to decide each year, as circumstances require,

what the calendar of its session should be. That, however, does not prevent the adoption of a minimum of rules which may themselves be flexible. On the contrary, the Mexican delegation believes that it would promote the smooth progress of the Committee's work. It therefore wishes to reiterate the suggestion it made last November in the First Committee of the General Assembly to the effect that a minimum of stability should be ensured as regards the annual opening and closing of the Committee's sessions. For example, the third Tuesday in January might be fixed as the opening date, and as to the closing date it should be decided that it should never be later than the third Tuesday in September, which, it will be remembered, is when the General Assembly begins its regular sessions.

Drafting of the Committee's annual report

13. Certain unfortunate circumstances brought out by the Committee's 1969 report, which were carefully analysed in the Mexican delegation's statement in the First Committee on 17 November 1969, have emphasized the need to adopt an appropriate procedure for the drafting of the annual report so that it faithfully reflects the facts and situations it describes and its contents are approved both by the two Co-Chairmen and by all the other members of the Committee.

14. To achieve this, it might be sufficient to employ the procedure used in the Fifth and Sixth Committees of the General Assembly which, as modified for the needs of the Committee on Disarmament, might consist of the following:

(a) Sufficiently before the end of the session, the Co-Chairmen would give the Secretariat general directives regarding the form and substance of the report in question, so that the preparation of a preliminary draft may be started at the appropriate time.

(b) The preliminary draft, prepared by the Secretariat in accordance with the Co-Chairmen's directives, would be submitted to them and after any changes they request are incorporated, it would be reproduced as the draft report and circulated to all the other members of the Committee, preferably about a month before, but in any case not less than two weeks before, the end of its session.

(c) The draft report would be discussed at as many informal or formal meetings as may be necessary. Whatever changes may be required to ensure that the final text is unanimously adopted would be made.

Publicity of results of formal meetings

15. In view of the very serious dangers which the arms race, particularly the nuclear arms race, poses for the whole world, so much so that experts have said that basically what is at stake is the very survival of mankind, it is not surprising that all peoples have a special interest in closely following the work on disarmament.

16. It is true that the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament is in part in the nature of a "negotiating body", so that a certain amount of discretion is necessary with respect to such activity. At the same time, however, it should be remembered that this is only one aspect of its work. There is another aspect which is no less important, that of its being a "deliberating body", and in that respect there does not seem to be any reason whatever to justify continuation of the method of private meetings which has been followed so far. Actually, the Committee's official or formal meetings, at which each representative confines himself to reading a carefully prepared text, are in no way different from the meetings at which year after year the First Committee of the General Assembly discusses the Committee's report and examines all questions relating to disarmament.

17. The Mexican delegation has consequently reached the conclusion that it would be highly advisable henceforth to make such meetings public, like those of the First Committee referred to. The adoption of such a decision would have obvious advantages so far as informing world opinion is concerned, including that of the presence at such meetings of the journalists accredited to the European Office of the United Nations who wished to attend and who would be able to use first-hand, complete and up-to-date documentation, to which they have hitherto as a rule had sufficiently early access only in general and incomplete terms and which has been made available to them in its totality so belatedly that it no longer served the need for news of topical interest, of capital importance to the Press. The Committee itself would gain from such a system, because it would help its work to become better known and, as is clear from the SIPRI study referred to in paragraph 3, there seem to be no disadvantages to using it and many potentially positive results.